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SAINT ANGELA MERICI
FOUNDERESS OF THE URSULINES

by Irene Mahoney, O.S.U.

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ERRATA in first printing

(These have been corrected in the second printing)

page 5 1. 3 sustenance

page 5 1. 5 times

page 10 1. 18 respect

page 11 1. 24 interrupted

page 17 1. 24 lord. The

page 21 Ursulines of Youngstown

Some saints are immediately recognizable by the extraordinary events of their lives or by their distinguishing accomplishments: Benedict by his rule, Augustine by his hard-won conversion, Francis by his impetuous consecration to poverty, Teresa of Avila by her treatises on the mystical way. But Angela Merici? She is variously conceived, variously portrayed, as though there were nothing unique in her life to signalize her. And, indeed, there is little to provide the flamboyant coloring of legends.

Born in a little farmhouse, Le Grezze, she lived in various towns in northern Italy – Desenzano, Salo, Brescia – and died in a small room off the Church of St. Afra in Brescia which a generous friend had rented for her use. She had worked where she was needed, lived where provision was made for her, and prayed with the passionate consistence of love.

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Yet despite this obscure simplicity, as her life ended she was referred to, even by the local clergy, as "La Santa"; and the small group of young women whom she had gathered to found her first Company under the patronage of St. Ursula were soon to spread over the face of the earth.

The date of Angela's birth has never been definitively established. We know only that it occurred between 1470 and 1475. Her parentage, however, is less obscure. She was the daughter of a small farmer of Desenzano, Giovanni Merici, and his wife, a member of the well-placed Biancosi family. That she was one of a fairly large family seems probable, although there is conclusive evidence of only one sibling: an unnamed sister who died while still young.

We know little of those early years except for what Angela later confided to her close friends: that she did her share of women's work – the daily tasks of carrying water, keeping the dirt floor hard-packed and neat, cooking, baking, washing. There was apparently no schooling for her beyond the instruction provided by her parents. It was, however, not an illiterate household, for Angela recounts how her father would read to them from his small but precious library, the lives of the saints. She confided, too, that her lifelong habits of fasting and prayer were begun and encouraged in the household of Le Grezze.

Beyond that simple rhythm of work and prayer, family service and religious devotion, we know nothing. Perhaps there is nothing more to know. And perhaps it is precisely this daily uneventfulness, so disappointing to our taste for the flamboyant, that caused so many bizarre legends to spring up after her death. There is the story of the child Angela who, sensing her beauty for the first time, rubs soot into her beautiful blond hair to protect herself from vanity and the seductions of the world. There is the story of her stealthy escape from her home, accompanied by a younger brother (or sister) in order to find a desert (or a mountain) (or a moor) where she could live as a destitute hermit for the love of God. There are tales of angelic visitations, of dangers miraculously circumvented, of fasts miraculously sustained.

Such legends are now acknowledged for what they are: dramatic symbols conjured up by the imagination of an age with the tendency to equate sanctity with the extraordinary.

Happily we can discard them for they distort rather than illumine the simple sanctity which is Angela's gift to the Church.

There is, however, one extraordinary event of those early years which is testified to by all her biographers who affirm that they learned of it from Angela herself. Sometime in her early adolescence Angela lost her sister in death. No details have come down to us of their relationship beyond the fact that they had been devoted to each other and that Angela, bereft of her closest companion, prayed daily for a sign that her sister was in heaven. One day during harvest time her prayer was answered. As she sat alone in the field during the mid-day break, she had a vision, one of those supernatural "showings" which often directed the lives of the saints. She saw, in the words of one of her early biographers, "heaven open and a glorious procession of angels and virgins advancing two by two. The young virgins were singing to the sound of music made by the angels. The song was so deeply impressed on Angela's memory that afterwards she was able to sing it. While the procession passed before her, the young girl recognized one of the virgins as her beloved sister who, shortly before, had died a happy death. Her sister stood still and the whole procession with her; then, looking into the future, she told Angela that God wanted to make use of her to found a Company of consecrated virgins . . ."

This event, of only a few minutes' duration, gave prime focus to Angela's spirituality and an unwavering direction to her life. By God's grace she would found a company of consecrated

virgins. Her response tells us much about her faith and her temperament. Young, sheltered, inexperienced, she seemed never to doubt that the burden of her vision would be fulfilled. She believed; without understanding, she believed. Such was her faith. Neither the magnitude of the task nor her own inexperience overwhelmed her. She must have been awed but she was never cowed. Such was her temperament.

There is no evidence to determine the exact date of this vision nor is there any to determine the other significant event of those years: the deaths, in quick succession, of Giovanni Merici and his wife. With their deaths the sheltering household of Le Grezze was dissolved and Angela, suddenly orphaned, was taken into the household of her maternal uncle in the neighboring town of Salo.

Thus began Angela's lifelong pilgrimage. Although she was spared the full knowledge of it then, in fact she was never again to have a home of her own. Her life was to be spent in a pilgrimage of service. From henceforth she would live where she was needed, in whatever lodgings friends provided for her. She would live with her uncle until she reached maturity; she would travel to Brescia to help and console a bereaved family; she would journey to the Holy Land; she would travel to Rome and then back to Brescia. She was to be a woman without a home.

While it is true that she never experienced destitution, that the families with whom she lived provided for her generously and often with a style her simple country beginnings would not have anticipated, the fact remains that she had no home of

her own. For most women such a despoilment is crucifying. The insistent need to build a nest, to provide succor and sustenance is a common female drive. But for Angela, an Italian woman of the sixteenth century, the need must have been at time imperious. In such an age woman's image and role were clearly and narrowly defined: she was to keep the house, whether that house was a simple peasant hut or a lord's manor.

Mobility, physical, social or economic, had not yet invaded the structures of Renaissance Europe. There was a rootedness about life. Ordinary citizens did not expect to wander far from their families. Land and trades were passed down within the family from father to son. Only adventurers, soldiers of fortune, or powerful lords traveled the dangerous highways. If rootedness was part of a man's expectancy, it was doubly part of a woman's. Yet Angela lived wide of this expected course, following a path revealed to her not by social custom but by the Holy Spirit. This sensitivity to the dictates of the Spirit of God was a constant in her spiritual growth. The importance that she places on the guidance of the Spirit is clear in the chapter on Obedience in the Rule which she will later draw up for her Company: "above all," she writes, "you must obey the counsels and inspirations constantly to be heard in your hearts by the action of the Holy Spirit; this voice we shall hear the more clearly as our conscience is purer and more spotless; for the Holy Spirit, according to the word of Jesus, is he who teaches us all truth." It is a counsel which clearly reflects her own life-long spiritual tendency.

How long Angela remained in her uncle's house in Salo we do not know. It may be as some of her biographers say that at some point she returned to Desenzano, but the evidence is not conclusive. In any case, we can conjecture that she followed the ordinary pattern of a young Italian girl reaching maturity in the sixteenth century – with one noteworthy exception: there was no talk of marriage.

At some time, very early in her life, Angela had consecrated herself to God and determined to live a life of virginity. Also during these years she took another step, perhaps to strengthen and sustain her in her vocation. She became a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, the organization conceived by Francis of Assisi to enable lay people to devote themselves more resolutely to the service of the Church. As a tertiary, a certain structure was given to Angela's life: she had a rule to follow, guidelines for the clothing she was to wear, responsibilities for prayer. It also provided certain privileges: the opportunity for frequent Holy Communion (a privilege not ordinarily accorded to lay people) as well as the support of other tertiaries. Throughout her life Angela took her membership in the Third Order of St. Francis very seriously and even after forming her own company, she continued to identify herself as "Suor Angela, Terziaria."

It is not until 1516, when she was approximately forty years old, that Angela emerges from her years of obscurity. In that year, Angela, under the direction of her Franciscan superiors, traveled to Brescia to assist and console another member of the large Franciscan family, Caterina Patengola, who had just suffered the loss of her husband and her two sons.

The city to which Angela was sent had once been a model of vitality and prosperity, but by 1516 it had suffered the ravages of war and of spiritual decay. Less than four years earlier the citizens, rising in rebellion against the French forces which occupied the city, went down in defeat against the superior strength of their invaders. Totally out of hand, the soldiers killed and raped and looted. Ten thousand people died, the historians report, and innumerable churches and public buildings were sacked. By the end of the uprising the material resources of the city were in shambles.

The spiritual resources of Brescia had long been dissipated. Brescia was perhaps no worse than many other Italian cities where the bishop rarely visited his diocese, where clergy were either absent or living dissolutely, where seminaries and monasteries were places of license and ignorance. For the first time in her life, Angela, the quiet woman from the countryside, was brought face to face with the destruction of war and the more subtle destruction caused by immorality.

She has left us no record of those first months away from the tranquil countryside of Desenzano and Salo; the fact that she stayed on in the ravaged city is perhaps record enough of both her stamina and her compassion. The shock of the dissolute city far from undermining her strength called forth new reserves of energy and enlarged her vision of service. Perhaps it was in these days when confronted with a task beyond human strength that she experienced in a more penetrating way her need to root her action in the power of God's action. Thus she will later write to her daughters: "Do not lose

courage, then, if you feel yourselves incapable of knowing and doing all that such a special charge demands. Have confidence and strong faith that God will assist you in everything . . . Act, bestir yourselves, have hope and confidence, make efforts, cry to Him with all your hearts. You will certainly see wonders, if you direct everything to the praise of His Divine Majesty and the greater good of souls." Within a short time Angela had taken hold and was responding to needs far beyond those of the Patengola family.

It was, however, in the Patengola household that Angela met the three men who were to be important throughout her life: Girolamo Patengola (Catherine's nephew), Agostino Gallo (Girolamo's friend) and the prosperous young merchant, Antonio Romano. It was through these friends that Angela's apostolate in Brescia took shape. There seems to be some question about the nature of this work but there is no question that within a few years Angela had gathered about her a group of young men and women who were engaged in nursing the sick, especially the so-called Incurables (those suffering from venereal disease) and finding a place of protection for children who were the most pathetic victims of Brescia's poverty and immorality.

Angela's conduct at this time may baffle us. It was over twenty-five years since she had had her "vision" – that moment at which she had been divinely directed to found a "company of young girls" – and yet she seems to have taken no positive steps towards its achievement. What are we to think? That she lacks courage for the venture? That she becomes too

caught up in the urgencies of each day to map out the future? That she has forgotten her youthful dream? Future events show us that it was not so and we can only deduce that Angela's relationship to God was one of such insistent awareness that she would immediately sense the moment that God wished her to act. So far the moment had not come and meanwhile she lived in patience, in prayer, in good works. Angela's attitude at this time is to be expressed a hundred years later by her famous daughter, Marie Guyart, who in similar circumstances was to write: "He has his own time, this God of ours."

Angela apparently lived in the Patengola household for only a short time. She then accepted the invitation of Antonio Romano to take up residence in his home situated in the heart of Brescia. It is from Romano that we get some details of Angela's daily life and of her asceticism. Her meals were spare, he attests; she did not take either meat or wine. Her sleep was equally spare; much of the night was spent in prayer. Yet far from sapping her energy, her mortification seemed to augment it, for her days were spent unceasingly in the service of others. For the first time we have evidence that her special gift was not so much in providing material resources but in her wise counsel to those who came to her disturbed. Agostino Gallo writes of this time: "La Reverenda Madre, for many years, indeed as long as she was in this world, was a great support to many people. They came to her, one for help to change his life or to bear sorrow; another to draw up a will, others to decide on a marriage, or even to arrange marriages for their daughters;

many came to her for advice, each according to his needs." And according to their needs she was able to help them.

This is perhaps the clearest insight into Angela's personal gifts that we are given except for her writings which come only at the end of her life. "They came to her," writes Agostino Gallo and with these words opens for us the riches of Angela's personality. She had a charism for attracting people, for leading them to confide their diverse troubles: a bereavement, a will, an unmarried daughter. She counselled them in all and with such affection and wisdom that her room was never empty. Here she remained for fourteen years while she waited for God's moment to begin to gather her company.

From time to time, however, the rhythm of her life in Brescia was interrupted while Angela went on pilgrimage. It was an age in which pilgrimages to various holy places were highly regarded religious experiences and the people who undertook these dangerous experiences and arduous journeys were accorded profound respect. Of Angela's various pilgrimages (to Mantua, to the "New Jerusalem" at Varallo, to Rome) the most important is, of course, her pilgrimage to the Holy Land which she undertook in 1524 in the company of Antonio Romano.

Under the supervision of the Franciscans the pilgrimage set out from Venice on the day following Corpus Christi. The voyage was smooth and uneventful until they stopped at Candia (now Crete) where Angela was suddenly and inexplicably stricken with partial blindness. Never for a minute did she consider abandoning her goal despite the fact that she

had to be led slowly from place to place. The strange malady persisted during her days in the Holy Land and then disappeared as mysteriously as it had come.

It is hard to know what we are to make of this strange occurrence which is never mentioned except for a few puzzling phrases in Antonio Romano's deposition after Angela's death: "She told me herself, that when they led her from one holy place to the next in the course of the pilgrimage, she contemplated each with the eyes of her soul, just as though they were present to her physical sight." Perhaps it was God's enigmatic way of telling her that He himself will reveal what He wants her to see even when her natural vision is incapable of dispelling the darkness.

Shortly after her return to Brescia she set out once again on pilgrimage, this time to Rome to celebrate the Jubilee Year. During her visit Angela had a private audience with the reigning pontiff, Clement VII. He was apparently aware of Angela's work and her reputation for holiness, for during the course of their audience he asked her to remain in Rome and work for the Center of Charities. Surprisingly, Angela, always so docile to the suggestions of her ecclesiastical superiors, politely refused. God had made it incontrovertibly clear that the work He expected of her was to be done in Brescia.

Her work in Brescia was soon to be violently interrupted, however. Within two years the Imperial army of Charles V had broken through the gates of Rome and in May 1527 sacked the city. Not long after, Brescia was put in jeopardy and as many as could fled to the countryside. Under the protection

of her friends Agostino Gallo and Girolamo Patengola, Angela moved to Cremona to await the end of the war.

It was in Cremona that Angela was stricken gravely ill. The description of this event and of her sudden return to health is told by Agostino Gallo with something of the naive charm often found in saints' legends. Sure that Angela was dying, Patengola composed an epitaph for her grave and with an ingenuousness difficult to understand, he read it to Angela as she lay on her deathbed. "Be glad, Mother," he concluded, "tomorrow we shall put this inscription on your tomb." Then writes Gallo, "Angela felt a joy so intense that she sat up and spoke for half an hour on the happiness of the elect in heaven. Her joy at the approach of death cured her." Whatever the cause, she was in fact cured, for shortly after we find her on another pilgrimage this time to Varallo where the Holy Places of Jerusalem were simulated so that the faithful who were not able to travel to the Holy Land might have something of the physical appearance close to home.

By 1530 Angela was back in Brescia. Always rather small, she seemed increasingly frail and despite her spiritual energy she tired more quickly. In a few years she would be sixty years old – a ripe old age for a woman of the sixteenth century. It was over forty years since she had experienced that momentary vision directing her to form a religious company of virgins. Yet in all those years she had made no overt move to carry out her mission. Now, quite suddenly it would seem, she began to take positive steps for shaping her company.

She moved from Agostino Gallo's comfortable household and took up residence in a little room near the parish church. By 1532 she had gathered around her a small group of young girls and widows. And in August of that year she once again made a pilgrimage to Varallo. It was the last of her journeys. From then on Angela was to put all her time and her energy into shaping her company.

What mysterious sign God had given her to assure her that the time was at last ripe we will never know. Perhaps no sign at all beyond an interior movement of grace impelled by the Holy Spirit to whom Angela was perfectly sensitive. Later, in her "Legacy" – those directions to the women who would be the first guides of the Company – she would write: "Follow what charity and the Holy Spirit will inspire and suggest to you." Now, transparently attuned through years of prayer and service to the motions of that Spirit, Angela moved unhesitatingly toward the fulfillment of her mission. Her secretary, Gabriel Cozzano, later wrote: "She would never have begun the work without a clear directive from Christ Our Lord who cried out in her heart urging her on, and even constraining her to undertake the foundation."

Now there was no further hesitation. Angela knew exactly what she was about. So direct and unwavering was her plan that it is easy to ignore its uniqueness. Angela was not drawing up an outline for another convent of women, nor was she establishing a blueprint for a group of women bound only by a program of good works. Her Company was to have an inner dynamic beyond its exterior apostolate. They were to be

women of prayer and virtue, with a simple rule to follow and spiritual leaders to whom they would be accountable and who would strengthen and direct them. They would not take the vows demanded of women living in convents. Angela's daughters were to have no convent but were to continue to live in their own homes or in cases where this was not possible with one or two other members of the Company. The Rule they were given was short and inspirational rather than highly detailed. It spoke of the merit of fasting and prayer and reception of the sacraments. It explained the value of the virtues of obedience, virginity and poverty and encouraged the members to live out these virtues in accord with their situation.

And so in that simple Primitive Rule Angela opened the way to religious institutes whose blend of apostolic mission and religious consecration would free religious women for new roles in the Church. She had, as her friend and secretary Gabriel Cozzano would later attest, "brought forth in her heart, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, an entirely new form of life."

The Primitive Rule was a document of immense vision, yet grounded in the practical realities that her daughters must deal with. The final chapter, On Government, shows how well Angela understood the climate of her time. The virgins she had gathered around her were for the most part young and inexperienced and would need careful nurturing not only in their spiritual life but also in the affairs of the world. Toward this end, four members of the Company, "the most capable,"

were to act as "teachers and guides in the way of the spiritual life." They would have the obligation of visiting the sisters in their homes every two weeks "or more or less often as they find it necessary to strengthen them and help them if they meet with opposition or trouble." In addition, four widows "prudent and of honorable life" were to act as "mothers, careful for the welfare of their daughters." Finally, four men "of experience and tried virtue" were to be elected who would act as "fathers in the current needs of the Company." This model of government, so original and so congruent with the aims and structure of the Company, is sufficient proof of Angela's practical wisdom as well as her charismatic gifts.

Her Company, the dream of her life, was at last taking shape. On November 25, 1535 Angela gathered her companions (now twenty-eight in number) together in the oratory near the Church of St. Afra. The ceremonial surrounding the new foundation was marked by the same simplicity with which Angela had lived her life. The members assisted at Mass and then each in turn signed her name in the "Book of the Company," thus solemnly promising her fidelity. They would henceforth be known as the Company of St. Ursula, a virgin martyr highly regarded as the patroness of youth.

Angela, now about sixty years old, had at last incarnated her vision. She had grown much frailer since her illness at Cremona and she knew she would not have long to mold and confirm her first companions. In fact, she was to live for only five more years, but during that time she composed two documents: her Counsels and her Legacies addressed to those who would

guide the Company after her death. Like her Rule, they are simple documents, concise, wise, and pregnant with the spirit of the Gospels which she frequently quotes.

She makes no attempt to prescribe in detail their manner of life, the pattern of their services to the Church, or the texture of their spirituality. Times, she knew, would change and her Company, if it was to remain a dynamic force, must adapt to those changes. For such adaptation only one rule was necessary, the rule which had guided her own life: "Make provision for everything, according as the Holy Spirit inspires you," she counselled. She did, however, warn the four Company leaders of the dangers they must always be on their guard against: new fads and trends which will lead the members from the truth of the Gospels, disharmony which is always a source of spiritual ruin and unhappiness, the tendency to seek consolation in merely worldly things. But above all, she tells them, they must be kind, never using their authority as a weapon but recognizing how unworthy they are for the important task with which they are entrusted. In her Testament to the four widows who are to act as mothers, the same quality is stressed. "Please," she writes, "will you try to bring them up with love, with a gentle and kindly hand, not domineeringly nor harshly. Try to be kind always."

She does not minimize the difficulties of the life she has outlined for them; but she is firm that it is not beyond their strength, provided that they seek that strength where it is to be found. "Do not lose courage, then, if you feel yourselves incapable of knowing and doing all that such a special charge

demands. Have confidence and strong faith that God will assist you in everything." And again, "Let your first refuge always be to have recourse to Jesus Christ."

In a touching maternal conclusion, knowing that death is not far off, she assures them that her death will not separate her from the Company she loves but that she will be even more present to them than when she was alive. And in a final burst of loving confidence she writes, "every promise I have made you will be fulfilled in full measure."

On January 27, 1540, Angela died in her little room off the Church of Saint Afra. At the end there seems to have been nothing unusual – neither great suffering nor great visions. It was a simple going forth, quiet and faithful as her life had been.

That the city where she had spent most of her life recognized her sanctity is clear from the account given by the City Chronicler: "Of Sister Angela Merici. On the date of 27 January 1540 died the daughter of the late Tomaso [sic] di Merici of Desenzano in Brescian territory; between the age of 65 and 70, a woman of average height but very thin of body: she was dressed in gray. On the 28 of the month at four o'clock of the day she was carried to St. Afra's Church . . . I myself saw her . . . She was carried with such solemnity and amidst such crowds of people that it was like the funeral of a great lord. the reason for all this was that Madre Suor Angela taught far and wide the faith of the most high God and everyone loved her."

AFTERWARD

Within a few years of Angela's death her Company expanded rapidly, first within Brescia itself and then to other Italian cities, notable among them Milan, under the guidance of its zealous archbishop, Charles Borromeo. In less than a hundred years from its founding, Angela's Company had spread to both France and Germany. Soon, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland all had their Ursuline houses. By 1639 the first Ursuline missionary to the New World, Marie Guyart, known in religion as Marie of the Incarnation, set out from France to establish a school in the little Canadian outpost of Quebec. By the nineteenth century this first missionary thrust had been followed by foundations throughout North America and in many countries of South America. By the twentieth century, Ursulines had pushed their spirit of adventure even farther, establishing schools, orphanages, dispensaries in China, Japan, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Malta, the Cameroons, and a large number of African countries.

Although Angela could not have envisioned such growth, she had implicitly prepared for it when she counselled in her Legacy, "If with change of times and circumstances, it becomes necessary to make fresh rules, or to alter anything, then do it with prudence, after taking good advice." Times and circumstances had changed greatly since that morning in November, 1535 when the first members of the Company, as a sign of their consecration, had simply signed their names in the book Angela provided. The world had opened up for them and with that expansion new rules and directions had become

expedient. For many groups the simple life in their own homes had given way to formal life in a cloistered convent; solemn vows had replaced their simple promise; ministry had become restricted to what could be carried out within their cloistered walls. Yet the essential movement outward was never lost and the missionary thrust of carrying the Gospel to those most in need has remained an integral element in the life of Angela's daughters. Few Third World countries do not have an Ursuline house; and even in those countries where repressive governments have made the overt preaching of the Gospel impossible, Ursulines have found a way of witnessing to Christ by faithful Christian presence.

Throughout the years Angela herself has been true to her promises. "I myself will be in your midst, furthering your prayers," she had written to her daughters shortly before her death. But if this were not encouragement enough, she dared to go further, speaking not only to her contemporaries but to all who would join her Company through the centuries: "Hold it for certain that this Rule has been planted directly by His holy hand and that He will never abandon this Company till the end of time. If it was He who planted it in the first place, who is there that can uproot it? Believe this: do not doubt but have firm faith that this will be so. I know what I am talking about. Blessed are they who sincerely take up his work."

FOLLOWING IS A LIST OF
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Ursulines of Belleville
Ursuline Motherhouse
1026 North Douglas Avenue
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Ursulines of Brown County
Ursuline Center
St. Martin, Ohio 45118

Ursulines of Bruno
Ursuline Sisters
Ursuline Convent
Bruno, Saskatchewan
SOK OSO Canada

Ursulines of the Chatham Union
Ursuline Generalate and
Motherhouse
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N7L 3L8 Canada

Ursulines of Cincinnati
Ursuline Sisters
St. Ursula Convent
1339 E. McMillan Street
Cincinnati, Ohio 45206

Ursulines of Cleveland
Ursuline Motherhouse
Ursuline Educational Center
2600 Lander Road
Cleveland, Ohio 44124

Ursulines of Louisville
Ursuline Motherhouse
3115 Lexington Road
Louisville, Kentucky 40206

Ursulines of Maple Mount
Mt. St. Joseph Ursuline
Motherhouse
Maple Mount, Kentucky 42356

Ursulines of Paola
Ursuline Motherhouse
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Paola, Kansas 66071

Ursulines of Prelate
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